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ABSTRACT

Independent investigations have demonstrated consistent relationships among family communication, cognitive style, and media behavior when any two of these variables are associated in the same study. The evidence so far supports the hypotheses that family communication patterns are associated with different strategies for dealing with persons and information, thus influencing the role and effects of television and other media in the lives of young persons. However, a theoretical model is needed to clarify the process of this influence. Such a model would support the following hypotheses: (1) cognitive style will function significantly in explaining variance in media use and gratifications by family communication patterns; (2) "rule" gratifications in the media will be significantly associated with convergent thinking and socio-orientation in family communication patterns; (3) "idea" gratification in the media will be significantly associated with divergent thinking and concept-orientation in family communication patterns; and (4) general orientation to media will function significantly in explaining variance in media use and gratifications by family communication patterns. The testing of these hypotheses will require longitudinal research and should be associated with different leisure activity choices over time. (HOD)

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THE INFLUENCE OF FAMILY COMMUNICATION ON MEDIA BEHAVIOR

by

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THE INFLUENCE OF FAMILY COMMUNICATION ON MEDIA BEHAVIOR

Within the past ten years, a tremendous amount of energy has been spent on the advocacy of federal control over TV programming in one form or another -- banishment of commercials from children's cartoons on Saturday morning, a "family hour" in which less violence is displayed in adult programs, etc. It is the premise of this paper that such a solution to the problem of TV's alleged influence is administrative and bureaucratic, and does not attend in any reasonable fashion to the root of the difficulty, namely the attraction of TV as a major cultural outlet for society. The argument to be pursued here is not one that places the burden of responsibility for appropriate communication on the media, but rather adopts the notion that the audience is active, selects meaningful/rewarding material from among many stimuli, and can learn effectively to select other stimuli because TV programs are so incredibly predictable...in a word, boring.

This paper will argue that the preferences for leisure time activities are set early in child development by family communication patterns stressing the importance of persistent cognitive style characteristics, that preferred communication patterns can be identified and operate through cognitive style to influence leisure activity, and that the ultimate result of differences in communication patterns will be differences in leisure time preferences, specifically in perceived gratifications from TV consumption. In a nutshell, the solution to the problem of TV addiction is not more control over the specific content of TV but attention to the development of the TV consumer.

If the consumer is not interested in what TV has to offer, TV itself will change...a law of the marketplace. This is no small undertaking, of course, but the importance of cognitive style as a frame of reference against which attitudes, beliefs and behaviors are learned has largely been ignored by communication scholars seeking to reduce empirical associations to useful theory about media use/effects. This paper will attempt to provide at least partial remedy for the absence of such reductionist efforts.

COGNITIVE STYLES CAN BE DISTINGUISHED

The prior claim to be made when causal arguments are based on linkages to cognitive style is the discriminability of meaningful differences in such a concept. Cognitive style is roughly defined here as a consistent set of problem-solving strategies used by an individual. At least two basic modes of formal thinking have been identified through extensive factor analytic work by J. P. Guilford and his associates. Guilford's discriminations between convergent and divergent thinking have been widely accepted (Vernon, 1979, p. 60), even though there have been horrific disputes in the psychology community about the ultimate value of his structure of intellect model.

The literature on convergent vs. divergent thinking is extensive and provocative. Generally, tests of divergent thinking (creativity) have been shown to produce measures distinct from intelligence, but the independence depends largely on the heterogeneity of the sample (Vernon, 1979, p. 65). Furthermore, there is evidence that the relationship is not linear; so-called creativity scores are unrelated to intelligence above one standard deviation from the average IQ score.

Research has demonstrated that different cognitive styles representing distinctive and pervasive modes of thinking can be identified, regardless of the labels used to describe the operations. Where the distinction between convergent and divergent thinking has been made, Vernon (1979) offers the following caution:

> Some interesting personality and other differences between high-divergers and high-convergers have been reported, as well as some correlations with miscellaneous variables, such as free composition writing at school, cultural leisure-time pursuits, and so on. (p. 65)

These distinctions, however useful they may be, are less critical to the views expressed here than the relationship between modes of thinking and communication behavior of significant others in the immediate lifespace of the child -- usually the parents. It is to these relationships we now turn.

ENVIRONMENT CAN AFFECT COGNITIVE STYLE

It comes close to being a cultural truism to note that individual differences in a whole host of cognitive attributes can be traced to differences in upbringing. Most psychologists place particular emphasis on the kind and quality of interaction -- sensory stimulation, opportunity for activity, emotional relationships, and the like -- that take place early in the child's development. Vernon (1979) states that the socialization practices and home climate during preschool and school years are critical. "The 'democratic' but demanding home climate makes for better intellectual progress than the over-protective, the autocratic or the 'unconcerned' homes" (358).

Vernon summarizes the available evidence pertaining to child development and environmental effects with the following points:

1. A moderate correlation is consistently found between parental socioeconomic class (SES) and child intelligence . . .

2. Parental education and intellectual stimulation in the home are generally more predictive of child ability than are material circumstances . . .

3. Many of the observed differences in educability of middle-class and lower-class (ethnic minority) children have been attributed by Bernstein to the different language "codes" commonly used in the homes . . . (Vernon, 1979, 128-129).

However, there have been few attempts to identify the types of home environments typically associated with cognitive differences specified earlier in this paper. There are no studies tracing the development of convergent/divergent thinkers to particular home environments. There has been one unusual focus on the relationship between family environment and convergent/divergent thinking, however. Wade (1973) investigated the uses of leisure time by adolescents. Subjects were 363 high school students in California. These students' intelligence test scores were obtained from school records, three Guilford tests of divergent thinking (operationally defined as creativity) were administered, and students responded to an extensive questionnaire including items on their family communication patterns and leisure time activities. Father's education was a strong positive predictor of intelligence, but was not related to creativity; open family communication was positively related to creativity and not to intelligence.

In homes where family communication patterns emphasized ideas, students reported they felt they could talk freely with their parents on most subjects, that decisions about important matters were discussed, and that they felt free to complain if they didn't like their parents' decisions. Homes emphasizing correct social behavior and deference to elders produced the opposite reactions in these students.

Relationships between parent/child interaction and cognitive style do begin to emerge from the available data, whether that interaction is labelled maternal teaching style or, more generally, family communication patterns. Parent-child exchanges appear to define the home climate as well as any other variable, whether communication is observed at the preschool stage or reported by adolescents. Messages that stress attention to the rules, social conformity and right answers are consistently associated with dependence and convergent thinking styles. By contrast, tolerance for deviation, extended exploration of ideas, and focus on individual values are commonly found in homes where youngsters can be classified as divergent or creative thinkers. While there are undoubtedly some fine conceptual lines to be drawn between the terms just employed, the literature appears to draw a considerable amount of parallel between intelligence and convergent thinking, creativity and divergent thinking. Therefore, the process by which at least these basic distinctions in cognitive style can affect behavior can now be explored.

COGNITIVE STYLES CAN AFFECT BEHAVIOR

Cognitive theorists make one fundamental assumption -- that behavior is always based on cognition, the reconstruction of a situation according to particular styles of knowing or thinking, and not on the situation itself. New ways of thinking are created in the course of using old. Applying thinking strategies to new situations tends to create new strategies that assimilate the old; consequently, development in cognitive structure is not synonymous with changes in the specifics of the environment.

The number of studies linking cognitive style with specific behaviors has been exceedingly small, in spite of the enormous literature that has examined

oth convergent and divergent thinking. But, considerable research involving i[illegible]licit relations between cognitive style and subequent behavior has been accomplished by McLeod and Chaffee, and their students, in their investigations of specific family communication patterns. Working from Newcomb's (1953) A-B-X coorientation model, McLeod and Chaffee hypothesized dimensions of communication relations that emphasize interpersonal harmony at the expense of individual idea expression (socio-orientation stressing A-B relations) vs. the presentation of ideas at some obvious cost to personal accord (concept orientation stressing A-X relations). In Newcomb's model, A and B are people (e.g., parent and child) and X is an object or idea in their immediate environment (e.g., a TV program). A number of statements describing these respective dimensions were developed and a wide variety of respondents testified to the frequency with which their parents voiced these statements. In some investigations, parent/child correspondence in estimates of emphasis was measured. The resulting response distributions on the two dimensions were dichotomized at the median, producing a fourfold typology of family communication patterns, using the following labels:

Laissez-faire:	allows greatest individual freedom, but least within-family communication (stresses neither orientation)
Protective:	emphasis on harmony within the family (socio-orientation)
Pluralistic:	emphasis on the importance of ideas (concept-orientation)
Consensual:	greatest perceived strain toward agreement between family members (stresses both orientations) (for an extended discussion, see Comstock et al., 1978, pp. 192-196)

Table 1 (McLeod and Chaffee, 1972) indicates media behaviors that have been associated with these four family types. In each investigation, the research design has proposed the conceptual role of family communication in

the development of a frame of reference that may precede and organize subsequent behavior. Following the research tradition, Chaffee and Tims (1976) investigated the role of interpersonal communication in the prediction of TV viewing and its effects. While they found that viewing behaviors were very similar for parents and children in socio-oriented homes, there was little correlation between parent-child viewing in homes with strong concept-orientation.

In his most recent summary of literature in this area, Chaffee (1978) states that family communication patterns ". . . establish guidelines for the child to follow in the future." (7) Chaffee and his colleagues have assumed, but not formally tested, that family communication patterns provide the framework from which the child learns to construct social reality, but no systematic study has established the relationship of specific family communication emphases and specific cognitive styles.

TABLE 1. HERE

It would be speculative at best to reinterpret the explanations for all the research related to family communication patterns employing the cognitive mechanisms described above. However, Wade (1973) attempted a small test of such a cognitive model in her study of California high school students described earlier. Multiple regression was used to predict specific leisure activity, and the order in which variables were entered into the equation gave ample opportunity to test the direct vs. indirect effects of family communication patterns. In contrast to the analyses employed by McLeod and Chaffee, and their students, the two dimensions of family communication (concept and socio-orientation) were retained as opposite ends of a

communication pattern continuum; socio-items were reverse-scored to make an undirectional index. Higher scores meant more open communication; lower, more restricted. Demographics were entered first in the regression equation, then family communication scores, then intelligence and creativity. If the last variables made a significant contribution to the prediction of leisure activity, then the evidence would support the indirect functioning of family communication patterns assumed by Chaffee and specifically hypothesized here.

The Wade results showed that open family communication patterns are consistently associated with hobbies, discussion and whole family activities. In the final regression equations, FCP made significant contributions to the prediction of discussion (positive) and TV time (negative). The more open and responsive the teenager perceives his parents to be, the more likely he is to report frequent discussions with family or friends, which in turn appear to stimulate non-media pursuits.

In the Wade study, TV was a leisure option that was exercised when family communication was relatively poor and when club/hobby participation was nil. Watching TV contributed to discussion rather than the reverse pattern; the correlation data do not specify direction, but the responses on the questionnaires were clear.

Discussion also contributed to the prediction of time spent with print; discussion led to larger amounts of reading, rather than the reverse. The historical importance of intelligence and father's education as print correlates are not different in these data.

Finally, discussion was very much a part of non-media activity (clubs and hobbies). The more frequent the teenager perceived his discussion of his individual pursuits with family and friends, the greater his participation in clubs/hobbies. Divergent thinking capacity appeared to be a necessary

condition for non-media activity and father's education apparently provided the adequate financial backing sometimes required for hobbies.

TABLE 2. HERE

While the data from Wade's investigation support the effect of cognitive style on behavior and the manner in which that impact comes about is at least tentatively identified, Chaffee (1978) states succinctly the fundamental question that remains to be answered when he asks:

> What is the nature of the process by which habitual family communication patterns structure a person's subsequent communication, cognitive activity, and directed social behaviors?

Chaffee goes on to offer selective perception/information-seeking and de facto selective exposure interpretations to account for differences in behavior among families whose communication patterns differ, but neither approach admits of testing with the available data and neither provides a satisfactory umbrella under which consistent cognitive styles or selected behavior could be explained or predicted. On the one hand, selective perception in information-seeking implies that people seek from the environment only information that is pertinent to maintenance of A-B or A-X relationships in protective or pluralistic homes, respectively; specification of such information presents an insurmountable definition task over many relational situations. On the other, de facto selective exposure, while consistent with the Sears and Freedman (1967) explanation of why people attend to information congruent with their current beliefs, offers explanations outside the immediate communication environment for behavior differences and does not offer a fruitful paradigm from which predictions about future

behaviors can be made. A theoretical model linking family communication patterns, cognitive style, and behavior is therefore needed.

FAMILY COMMUNICATION, COGNITIVE STYLE AND MEDIA BEHAVIOR

The opening point of this inquiry was the argument that parents can persuade children that TV is not very interesting, and that the solution to undesirable programming on TV was departure of the audience rather than imposition of censorship.

Independent investigations have demonstrated consistent relationships among family communication, cognitive style and media behavior when any two of these variables are associated in the same study. While family communication has been shown to be related to media behavior, the process of influence is not entirely clear. Does family communication act directly or indirectly, through cognitive style? The evidence is thin; only the Wade (1973) study has included both variables and her data favor cognitive style as the more powerful predictor.

Recent survey results with adults indicate that cognitive style might need to be broadened to include general orientations to media along with convergent/divergent thinking. A random sample of 302 adults in Santa Clara County, California, were asked last spring to identify their favorite TV programs, describe the gratifications received from those programs, and the type of gratifications that were important from TV in general. Both groups of gratifications factored into three sets: information, diversion, and personal guidance. The items were then summed to form separate indices of orientations and program gratifications; the average alpha across six measures was .80. When regression equations were used to predict program gratifications, orientations played a significant role in each equation.

Table 3 reports the standardized regression coefficients for each gratification index. Clearly, the parallel orientation has significant predictive power. When time spent with TV and evaluation of TV watching as a preferred leisure alternative are criterion variables, using the same predictors, the orientations are still important in the regression equations. The results also showed that information was cited more strongly as an important contribution desired from TV viewing generally than it was chosen as a set of gratifications from favorite TV programs. That is, people said it was important for TV to provide information but they chose favorite TV programs that provided diversion.

Comstock and his colleagues (1978) tend to agree that young children watch TV because it is readily available, not because it is the most attractive leisure time alternative. Parents can and do influence what is seen by general communication behaviors already discussed or by parental modeling.[1] However, parental modeling and control over media exposure become less and less successful as children mature into teenagers, so the more effective influence strategy would appear to be a concerted effort to engage the youngster of any age in discussion of media or non-media pursuits. Comstock et al. argue that emphasis on family communication is ". . . new and promising. The evidence so far supports the hypothesis that such communication patterns are associated with different strategies for dealing with persons and information; this in turn suggests that such strategies would influence the role and effects of TV and other media in the lives of young persons." (195-196)

Parents have a near monopoly on the information received by children in their very early developmental years. This monopoly, of course, is

diminished once the child is exposed to peers or mediated information, most often from television. But it is the early influence of parents, their stresses on ways in which social reality should be constructed, that must provide the most salient framework from which new orientations can be developed.

When the interpersonal influence process theorized by Newcomb in his A-B-X paradigm is applied to parent/child communication, then the relations between A-B (e.g., parent and child) must be assumed to be positive and pervasive, either by preference or situational constraint. If the A-B relations are not positive and compelling, then none of the alleged influence of parents on children (or vice versa, for that matter) is theoretically possible. If there is no "strain toward symmetry" produced by the need to maintain A-B positive relationships, then the role of parent communication proposed by cognitive theorists is not accurate. The use of two independent dimensions, with the resulting fourfold typologies of different family communication types, is not theoretically meaningful. The large number of "consensual" families (those who appear to stress both A-B and A-X orientations) identified by Chaffee and his colleagues argue strongly for the reinterpretation of the A-B-X relationship.

In the view presented here, it is not the direct emphasis on A-B or A-X relationships that is the important part of the influence process, but the continuing parent-child coorientation that stresses socially approved responses or individual expression without value judgment. These different frames of reference may then lead to differences in behavior.

The continuing nature of the parent-child relationship gives stability to parent influence, even though its absolute magnitude may be moderated by other sources of social definition. The more frequently the parent and child interact about matters of importance, the more likely it is that the cognitive style of the child will resemble the social reality approach taken by the parent. As the effective parent monopoly over meaningful discussion is inevitably lessened when the child matures, satisfactory A-B relations between parent and child should foster a consistent A-X orientation, and the probability is strong that A-B (parent) coorientation will be augmented or supplanted with other A-B (peer) relations which encourage the same basic A-X attitudes. And the cycle continues.... The elaborated model in Figure 1 represents the process by which family communication is most likely to influence media behavior.

FIGURE 1 HERE

When descriptive characteristics of these variables are applied to the relationships in the theoretical model, the following hypotheses should receive support:

1. Cognitive style (convergent or divergent thinking) will add a significant increment to the explanation of variance in media use and gratifications by family communication patterns.

2. Attention to "rule" gratifications in the media will be significantly associated with convergent thinking and socio-orientation in family communication patterns.

3. Attention to "idea" gratifications in the media will be significantly associated with divergent thinking and concept-orientation in family communication patterns.

4. General orientation to media will add a significant increment to the explanation of variance in media use and gratifications by family communication patterns.

These relationships are expected when:

Socio-orientation is parent emphasis on socially correct responses.

Concept-orientation is parent emphasis on response productivity without value judgment.

The index called family communication pattern is the cumulative frequency of emphasis on either orientation (above).

Media use is the amount of time spent with various media.

General orientation toward media is the specification of gratifications considered important from each medium.

"Rule" gratifications provide information about correct ways to think/behave that may be received from media.

"Idea" gratifications provide information about diverse ways in which others think/behave that may be received from media.

The testing of hypotheses proposed here requires longitudinal research; i.e., measures of cognitive style and media orientation that result from identified family communication patterns need to be associated with different leisure activity choices over time. Therefore, the research model should employ field methodology using multiple measures across time for several age groups in the following pattern:

	YEAR 1	YEAR 2	YEAR 3
Age Groups	6	7	8
	9	10	11
	12	13	14

At each measurement period, the following data should be obtained: standard demography, family communication estimates by child and mother; peer communication estimates after age 9; convergent thinking (e.g., PPVT, WISC); divergent thinking (e.g., Wallach and Kogan test battery); family/peer coorientation measures (agreement, accuracy); various leisure activities (e.g., TV time, favorite TV programs, other media use, etc.); and gratifications from TV, etc.

Model testing across time will require extensive reliance on path analyses and cross-lagged correlation techniques with media behavior and gratifications as criterion variables.

The obvious key to the process is establishment of appropriate family communication patterns, but they are not likely to have strong direct effects on TV viewing. These patterns mask the cognitive style variable that has the impact on media behavior. Chaffee and Tims cite the need for a good test of the present model when they state:

> We have examined ways in which youngsters' uses of and reactions to television are intertwined with primary group interaction. Systematic empirical exploration of this viewpoint and its implications has lagged behind other approaches to the study of TV and young people. It has often been proposed, and occasionally demonstrated, that interpersonal factors account for some variance in children's viewing. We have developed several expansions of that proposition, and it is obviously a fruitful line for further research (italics supplied) (p. 112).

The work of Chaffee and his colleagues rests on the assumption that an appropriate frame of reference intervenes between family communication and media behavior. It is time to put that assumption to a formal test.

TABLE 1

CHILDREN'S MEDIA BEHAVIOR BY FAMILY COMMUNICATION PATTERN

	LAISSEZ-FAIRE	PROTECTIVE[a]	PLURALISTIC[b]	CONSENSUAL
TV TIME	MODERATE	VERY HIGH	VERY LOW	MODERATE
TV PUBLIC AFFAIRS VIEWING	VERY LOW	LOW	HIGH	HIGH
NEWS READING	VERY LOW	VERY LOW	HIGH	HIGH
MODELING PARENT TV USE	LOW	HIGH	LOW	HIGH

[a]PURE SOCIO-ORIENTATION, emphasis on interpersonal harmony
[b]PURE CONCEPT-ORIENTATION, emphasis on exchange of ideas

Summary results above are excerpted from McLeod and Chaffee (1972).

TABLE 2

PREDICTING TV/PRINT TIME AND HOBBIES

CRITERION	MULTIPLE CORRELATION	F	MAJOR PREDICTORS WITH PARTIAL CORRELATION COEFFICIENTS
TV TIME	.27	9.7	DISC (.24), FCP (-.17), HOBBIES (-.15)
PRINT TIME	.42	25.9	DISC (.26), INTELLIGENCE (.21), FATHER ED (.17)
CLUBS/HOBBIES	.50	39.1	DISC (.35), CREATIVITY (.24), FATHER ED (.19)

DISC = Frequency of discussion about both media and non-media activities in previous week.

NOTE: All linear regressions are statistically signficant.

TABLE 3

PREDICTION OF TV PROGRAM GRATIFICATIONS, TIME, AND USE FOR LEISURE

PREDICTORS	DIVERSION	INFORMATION	PERS GUIDANCE	TV TIME	TV-BEST LEISURE
	FAVORITE PROGRAM GRATIFICATIONS				
Sex		-.15			
Age	-.08			.08	.18
Education	-.12	.12	-.09	-.20	-.04
General Orientations[a]					
Diversion	.50	-.26			.22
Information	-.11	.28			
Pers. Guidance		.29	.60	.09	.18
TV time					.25
TV-best leisure				.26	
Involvement[b]	.16				
R	.64	.54	.62	.40	.47
F[c]	41.14	22.96	91.44	13.71	16.38

NOTE: figures in table are standardized regression coefficients

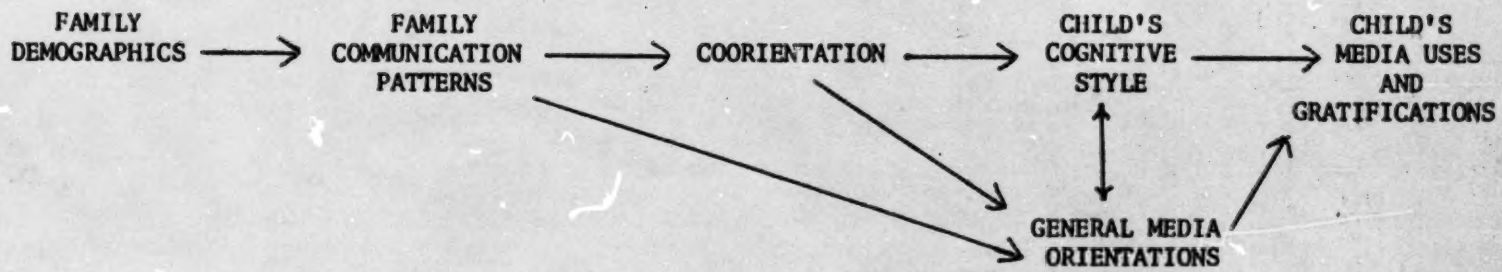
[a] Diversion/Information/Personal Guidance, respectively, are VERY IMPORTANT reasons for watching TV in general.

[b] Frequency with which someone gets concerned about TV characters, story lines, etc., and talks to TV.

[c] All Fs significant at $p < .001$.

FIGURE 1

FAMILY INFLUENCE PROCESS MODEL



NOTES

[1]Experimental research has shown that adults can affect the intensity of children's reactions to a visual medium (J. E. Grusec, 1973). Specifically, they can influence the impact of TV commercials (Prasad, Rao and Sheikh, 1978), improve children's comprehension of TV programs (Collins, Sobol, and Westby, 1981) and their retention of information or values presented on TV (C. R. Corder-Bolz, 1980). When mothers merely sit with their children while viewing TV, children learn more (G. Salomon, 1977). Survey results have demonstrated that the family environment can inhibit or encourage children's or adolescents' behavior after viewing aggression on TV (R. Brown, 1976). Parents can also assist children in discriminating between TV and reality (Greenberg and Reeves, 1976).

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